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JESUS: THE GREAT “I AM”

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JESUS: The Great "I AM"

Dave Miller, Ph.D.

Article In Brief...



As a Member of the Godhead, Jesus Christ shares complete deity with the other Members of the Godhead. In fact, the Bible repeatedly identifies Jesus with the Jehovah of the Old Testament.

IT is no exaggeration to state that the central subject matter of the Bible is about Deity. Secondarily, the Bible is about Deity's desire to enable human beings to be forgiven of their sin so that they may spend eternity with Deity. The words "Christ" and "Christianity" accentuate the fact that the Christian religion is all about Christ. Christianity is the one and only religion through which human beings may approach God in order to enter into a right relationship with Him (Acts 4:12). Specifically, the central feature of the Christian religion is the Person of Christ, i.e., His divinity. The very nature of an infinite, divine Being is such that it was absolutely indispensable for Deity to assume human form, taking on human flesh, in order to atone for human sin. **No other being could have achieved this mandatory requirement** (Hebrews 10:4; Micah 6:6-8). Since all humans have sinned (Romans 3:9ff.), it was necessary for God to **become human** and die for human sin. **It absolutely had to be God Himself—a member of the Godhead.** From eternity, it was the second Person of the Godhead Who was selected to fulfill this critical need: "Him whom the Father

sanctified and sent into the world" (John 10:36). Jesus was "set apart" to achieve a specific task. This doctrine is of such paramount importance to the Christian religion that a person can become a Christian if and only if that person orally confesses that Jesus is, Himself, divine (Romans 10:9-10).¹ Indeed, **the validity and legitimacy of virtually all other religions, including the Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims, stands or falls on this one doctrine alone.** For if God requires human beings to confess orally the deity of Christ before He can forgive them of their sins, and a person's religious beliefs deny that Jesus is divine, that person simply cannot be pleasing to God and, therefore, remains unsaved and unacceptable to Him.

MOSES ENCOUNTERS JEHOVAH

WHEN Moses was being commissioned by God at the burning bush to return to Egypt, go before Pharaoh, and convey to him God's demand to let the Israelites exit Egypt, Moses manifested considerable reluctance and offered several excuses why he was not the man for the job. One of his excuses pertained to God's identity:

Then Moses said to God, "Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they say to me, 'What is His name?' what shall I say to them?" And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And He said, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:13-14).

Extensive discussion has characterized Christendom through the centuries regarding God's response to Moses in this passage. Yet the bulk of Christendom generally agrees that the expressions "I AM" and "I AM WHO I AM" are allusions to the **eternity** of Deity.² No mere human being can make a comparable claim. All humans have come into existence. But not Deity. Deity is eternal in nature and infinite in divine essence—with no beginning and no end. This passage pinpoints the one true God, the only Being that possesses Godhood. None of the gods conjured by the minds of mere humans through the millennia are real. But the God Who spoke to Moses really exists.

JESUS CONNECTS HIS OWN DIVINITY WITH JEHOVAH

THOSE who deny the deity of Jesus must attempt to explain away Jesus' repetitious conduct while He was on Earth. Since John's purpose in writing his Gospel account was to demonstrate that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31), he, in particular, "went out of his way" to flag Christ's divinity.

John 8:58

It may well have been Moses' encounter with Jehovah in Exodus 3:14³ to which Jesus alluded on one of those occasions when He was verbally assaulted by the Jews:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he shall never see death." Then the Jews

said to Him, “Now we know that You have a demon! Abraham is dead, and the prophets; and You say, ‘If anyone keeps My word he shall never taste death.’ Are You greater than our father Abraham, who is dead? And the prophets are dead. Whom do You make Yourself out to be?” Jesus answered, “If I honor Myself, My honor is nothing. It is My Father who honors Me, of whom you say that He is your God. Yet you have not known Him, but I know Him. And if I say, ‘I do not know Him,’ I shall be a liar like you; but I do know Him and keep His word. Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.” Then the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM (*ego eimi*).” Then they took up stones to throw at Him (John 8:51-59).

A perusal of 61 English translations revealed that all of them translate Jesus’ words as “I AM,” without inserting “he” afterwards. The translators apparently felt that Jesus was claiming affiliation with Jehovah. Without a doubt, Jesus surely identified Himself with the **LORD** [Jehovah]⁴ of Exodus 3—an identification that His critics no doubt considered blasphemy and deserving of the death penalty by stoning.

But what does the expression in both passages mean? The Jehovah’s Witnesses’ NWT renders the sentence: “Jesus said to them: ‘Most truly I say to you, before Abraham came into existence, I have been.’”⁵ Compare this rendering with the NWT’s handling of Exodus 3:13-14—

But Moses said to the true God: “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your forefathers has sent me to you,’ and they say to me, ‘What is his name?’ What should I say

to them?” So God said to Moses: “I Will Become What I Choose to Become.” And he added: “This is what you are to say to the Israelites, ‘I Will Become has sent me to you.’”⁶

Are the renderings “I have been” and “I Will Become What I Choose to Become” legitimate renderings for the underlying Greek and Hebrew? What do the bulk of scholarly linguistic authorities through the centuries say on the matter?

In the first place, the Greek words *ἐγώ εἰμι* [*ego eimi*] in John 8:58 literally mean “I am.” The first term is the usual nominative first person singular pronoun “I.” The second term is the present tense active indicative first person singular verb “to be.” Hence, the words unquestionably mean “I am.” The Hebrew of Exodus 3:14 reads *נָא נָא שֶׁר נָא* which is literally “I am who I am,” “who” being a relative pronoun, and the repeated term is a first person singular imperfect verb in the Qal. The Septuagint translates the three Hebrew words into Greek as “*ego eimi ho on*” which means “I am the one who is.” The idea of ongoing existence is the apparent thrust of the words: “[T]he thought of eternal life is always present in the *ἐγώ εἰμι*.⁷ Observe that when all is said and done on the subject, Jesus’ allusion to Exodus 3:14 trumps linguists’ evaluation of the Hebrew text, since He provided a proper

understanding of the Hebrew by John’s inspired rendering of His words.⁸ Jesus said that the words mean, “I AM.” Morris insisted: “It is an emphatic form of speech and one that would not normally be employed in ordinary speech. Thus to use it was recognizably to adopt the divine style.”⁹

But what did Jesus mean when He declared “I AM”? Some commentators assume that the expression is intended to imply an unstated predicate and so offer several hypothetical possibilities—from the pronoun “He” (“I am He”), to “I am the Messiah,” to “I am the Deliverer,” or some other identification. However, noted Greek grammarian A.T. Robertson explains that in John 8:58, the verb *εἰμί* [*eimi*] “express[es] existence as a predicate like any other verb” and that “in John 8:58, *εἰμί* is really absolute.”¹⁰ In other words, “I AM” is its own predicate. Commenting on Jesus’ use of the same expression in John 8:24, he further explained “that I am’ without supplying a predicate in the absolute sense as the Jew (Deut. 32:39) used the language of Jehovah” could have been Jesus’ meaning, concluding that “Jesus seems to claim **absolute divine being**.¹¹ Marvin Vincent, classics professor and professor of New Testament Exegesis and Criticism at Union Theological Seminary, New York City, is not tentative about the meaning of

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verse 24: “[t]he words are rather the solemn expression of His absolute divine being.”¹²

Swiss theologian and textual commentator Fredric Godet explains Jesus’ claim regarding Abraham:

I am not only his contemporary, is the reply of Jesus, but I even **existed before him**. The formula, amen, amen, announces the greatness of this revelation concerning His Person. While γενέσθαι, was born (literally: became), designates the transition from nothingness to existence, εἰμί, I am, indicates a mode of being, not the result of such a transition: viz. existence (am) as an attribute of the personality (I). Jesus says: *I am*, not: *I was*. This latter expression would have designated mere priority with respect to Abraham, and would be strictly compatible with the Arian view of the Person of Jesus, while the former expression places the existence of the subject who thus speaks in the rank of the Absolute, the Eternal, the Divine. It recalls the words of Ps. xc. 2: “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever Thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, Thou art, God!”¹³

Nineteenth century German Protestant theologian, historian, biblical commentator, and linguistic authority, August Tholuck, observed: “After a usage of the Hebrew,... the expression ἔγώ εἰμι is to be construed: ‘I am that, I am who I am.’... γενέσθαι and εἶναι mark the distinction between human existence limited by time, and eternal existence.”¹⁴ In other words, as a finite being, Abraham’s existence was limited by time; but Jesus, being infinite, is eternal in nature. Tholuck continues: “The sense therefore is: ‘In my higher Being, in a manner not restricted by time, I am who I am, before Abraham had existence.’”¹⁵

Likewise, Heinrich Meyer, German Protestant theologian,

member of the Hanover Consistory, known for his valuable 16-volume exegetical and critical commentary on the New Testament, added his confirmatory observations: “As Abraham had not pre-existed, but came into existence (by birth), therefore γενέσθαι is used; whereas εἰμί denotes being *per se*, which belonged to Jesus, so far as He existed before time, as to His divine nature, without having previously come into being.”¹⁶ Marcus Dods, 18th-century theologian, biblical scholar, Professor of New Testament Exegesis and Principal in the New College, Edinburgh, explains Jesus’ words: “Before Abraham came into existence I am, eternally existent. No stronger affirmation of pre-existence occurs.”¹⁷ Kittel described it as “the pre-temporal existence of the Son.”¹⁸ And Warfield insisted: “He claims for Himself the timeless present of eternity as His mode of existence.”¹⁹

In his popular *Expository Thoughts* J.C. Ryle astutely observes:

This famous verse, I believe, can only receive one honest interpretation. It is a distinct assertion of our Lord’s eternity—His existence before all creation.... Let us carefully note what a strong proof we have here of the pre-existence and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ. He applies to Himself the very name by which God made Himself known when He undertook to redeem Israel. It was “I AM” who brought them out of the land of Egypt. It was “I AM” who died for us on the cross. The amazing strength of the foundation of a sinner’s hope appears here. Believing on Jesus we rest on divinity, on One who is God as well as man.²⁰

Cronin summarizes his review of centuries of commentary on Exodus 3:14: “We have seen ample evidence that the *Ehyeh* [‘I AM’—DM] of Exodus 3:14b has been long recognised [sic] in Judaism as the Per-

sonal name of God and YHWH as His proper name, where ‘Personal’ indicates the name by which God is known to Himself.”²¹

Commenting on John 8:58, Edwin Abbott, English schoolmaster and theologian, explained: “[T]aken here, along with other declarations about what Jesus IS, it seems to call upon the Pharisees to believe that the Son of man is not only the Deliverer but also **one with the Father in the unity of the Godhead.**”²² Buchsel agrees: “[T]here is here ascribed what Scripture attributes to the Father.”²³ C.K. Barrett, British biblical scholar and Professor of Divinity at the University of Durham, adds: “The meaning here is: Before Abraham came into being, I eternally was, as now I am, and ever continue to be.”²⁴ Professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, Charles Erdman likewise observed:

Jesus startles them by replying that, for him, life has been, and ever will be, **an eternal state....** This is a claim of identity with God in his changeless Being. No wonder that the Jews “took up stones...to cast at him” as a blasphemer. Such he was, or else he spoke the truth. The claims of Jesus are unmistakable. He was either a deceiver or the divine Son of God.²⁵

Vincent summarizes succinctly the meaning in John 8:58 voiced by all of these linguistic scholars: “Jesus’ life was from and to eternity. Hence the formula for *absolute, timeless* existence, *I am.*”²⁶

John 4:26

On several occasions, Jesus used the same expression—with a predicate—in the presence of others to refer to Himself. When He encountered the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, she assured Him: “I know that Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ). ‘When He comes, He will tell us all things”—to which

Jesus responded: “I who speak to you am *He*.” Again, “He” is not in the original. The order of the Greek is literally, “I am (ἐγώ εἰμι)—the One speaking to you” (John 4:26). Her subsequent actions show that she was grappling with the implications of Jesus’ declaration: “The woman then left her waterpot, went her way into the city, and said to the men, ‘Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?’” (John 4:28-29). Upon doing their own investigation, the Samaritans of her city exclaimed to her: “Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and **we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world**” (John 4:42). They realized they were in the presence of deity.

John 8:24

In addition to verse 58, John chapter eight has two additional affirmations. In the first instance, Jesus interacted with hostile Jews:

Then Jesus said to them again, “I am going away, and you will seek Me, and will die in your sin. Where I go you cannot come.” So the Jews said, “Will He kill Himself, because He says, ‘Where I go you cannot come?’” And He said to them, “You are from beneath; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for **if you do not believe that I am *He*, you will die in your sins**” (John 8:21-24).

In the NKJV, “He” is in italics as having been supplied by the translators. In keeping with the theme of the book of John, Jesus was undoubtedly emphasizing His deity to His enemies. He gives them several indications of His divine identity that they failed to grasp (“Where I go you cannot come,” “I am from above,” “I am not of this world,” etc.). Then He drove home

the point: “If you do not believe that I AM....” The only way for any person to be saved and ushered into heaven into the presence of Deity is if that person acknowledges and confesses that Jesus is divine. The deity of Christ is the foundational platform on which the entire scheme of redemption rests. It’s not an exaggeration to state that one cannot even talk about being right with God, saved, and forgiven of sin without understanding the divine Person of Christ as the sole means to that end.

John 8:28

Four verses later, Jesus made the same point to the same audience:

Then they said to Him, “Who are You?” And Jesus said to them, “Just what I have been saying to you from the beginning. I have many things to say and to judge concerning you, but He who sent Me is true; and I speak to the world those things which I heard from Him.” They did not understand that He spoke to them of the Father. Then Jesus said to them, “**When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am *He*, and that I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things.** And He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him” (John 8:25-29).

Once again, “He” is in italics. Jesus declared His intimate relationship with the Father as the backdrop of His own divine identity and eternal role in the salvation of mankind. Indeed, He announced to them that they were the very ones who would participate in His death by “lifting him up”—an obvious prediction of His crucifixion. What’s more, His resurrection would unquestionably cinch the point by proving His divinity.

John 13:19

Another instance is seen on the occasion when Jesus washed the feet of the apostles. His remarks foreshadowed the betrayal of Judas:

I do not speak concerning all of you. I know whom I have chosen; but that the Scripture may be fulfilled, “He who eats bread with Me has lifted up his heel against Me.” Now I tell you before it comes, that when it does come to pass, you may believe that **I am *He*.** Most assuredly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me (John 13:18-20).

Observe that Jesus was alerting the disciples to the fact that **He knew** that Judas was going to betray Him, even quoting Scripture that anticipated that fact—all further proof of His divinity. He was pressing them with the fact that when it happened, they would have additional confirmation of His claim to Godhood. As if that were not enough to make the point, Jesus strongly accentuated the fact with a double “amen” (rendered “most assuredly”)²⁷ followed by a reiteration of the Godhead: the Holy Spirit Whom Jesus would send (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7), Himself, and His Father Who sent Him.

John 18:5-6,8

Still another instance of the occurrence of *ego eimi* in John is seen on the occasion of Jesus’ arrest:

Then Judas, having received a detachment of *troops*, and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees, came there with lanterns, torches, and weapons. Jesus therefore, knowing all things that would come upon Him, went forward and said to them, “Whom are you seeking?” They answered Him, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus said to them, “**I am *He*.**” And Judas, who betrayed Him, also stood with them. Then—when He said to them, “**I am *He*,**”—they drew back and fell to the

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ground. Then He asked them again, “Whom are you seeking?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus answered, “I have told you that I am He. Therefore, if you seek Me, let these go their way,” that the saying might be fulfilled which He spoke, “Of those whom You gave Me I have lost none” (John 18:3-9).

Again, observe that the NKJV inserts the word *He* into the text. What was there in Jesus’ demeanor or words that would have caused the Jewish troops and the many other Jews who came—described by Luke as a “multitude” (Luke 22:47,52)—to draw back and fall to the ground? Surely not simple surprise that Jesus would admit to being the One for whom they were looking. If, on the other hand, being Jews, they were familiar with the divine identification associated with the words “I AM,” they would surely have been taken aback by His bold declaration—particularly if they were at all familiar with Jesus’ activities in and around Jerusalem in the recent days. Indeed, Jerusalem was abuzz with considerable talk regarding the Messiah (e.g., Luke 24:18-31). John had set the stage for this notoriety when he preached to people who “went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan,” including “many of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matthew 3:5-7). *The Complete Jewish Bible* renders verse 6: “When he said, ‘I AM,’ they went backward from him and fell to the ground.” For John to record this incident in his book—which the other three Gospel writers **did not record**—is yet another deliberate accentuation of Jesus’ repetitious attempts to encourage the Jews to recognize what they, of all people, should have recognized: the arrival on Earth of the divine Messiah.

Observe that in all these situations,²⁸ Jesus was stressing to His contemporaries—not merely that they must believe in Him—but that

they must believe in Him as the Son of God, even as the theme of John indicates. To become a Christian, one must “confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus” (Romans 10:9). The essence of Christianity revolves around Christ’s deity. That divinity must both be believed and confessed in order to sustain a saving relationship with God.²⁹

Matthew 14:27; Mark 6:50; John 6:20

Consider one additional incident that spotlights Jesus’ divinity. Matthew, Mark, and John all report the same incident in which Jesus walked on water. In all three accounts, when Jesus approached the boat in which the disciples were situated, He reassured them with these words: “It is I; do not be afraid” (Matthew 14:27); “Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid” (Mark 6:50); “It is I; do not be afraid” (John 6:20). In all three of these accounts, the Greek is the same: Ἐγώ εἰμι; μὴ φοβεῖσθε, which is rendered, “I AM—stop being afraid.” The import and impact of His words on them is seen in Matthew’s account: “Then those who were in the boat came and worshiped Him, saying, ‘Truly You are the Son of God’” (Matthew 14:33). The only reason for the disciples not to fear a life-threatening situation is if Jesus was more than a mere man Who, in fact, possessed the divine power to still a storm.

CONCLUSION

A host of additional scriptural evidence demonstrates the deity of Christ. The numerous indications that Jesus is to be identified with the LORD/Jehovah of the Old Testament is ample proof that Jesus is God. Though He assumed human form in order to come to Earth and atone for human sin, He remained an eternal Being Who shares complete divinity with the other two Members of the Godhead.

ENDNOTES

¹ In addition to the essentiality of the oral confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the other prerequisites to salvation include faith in Christ, repentance, and water immersion for the remission of sins into and in the name of Christ (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 13:3; John 8:24; Acts 2:38; 22:16; Romans 6:3-4; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27; 1 Peter 3:21; et al). See these free books: <https://apologeticspress.org/issue/receiving-the-gift-of-salvation/>; <https://apologeticspress.org/issue/baptism-and-the-greek-made-simple/>; <https://apologeticspress.org/issue/surrendering-to-his-lordship/>.

² This is not to say that the words “I am” are always used in Scripture to refer to the deity of the one who articulates the words. As in everyday discourse, a person can respond, “I am,” to any number of possible scenarios wherein the person is asked concerning his identity, e.g., “Are you the sister of so-and-so?” “I am.” Instances of this ordinary use of the expression may be seen in John 8:18; 9:9. However, in contexts in which Deity is plainly under consideration and doing the speaking, the divine import is self-evident.

³ While some question whether Jesus was connecting specifically with Exodus 3, many scholars insist that He was. See, for example, Ethelbert Stauffer who affirms: “This emphatic formula rests ultimately on the ‘I am that I am’ of Ex. 3:14”—(1964), ἐγώ, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 2:352. Also J.C. Ryle (1870), *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St. John* (New York: Robert Carter & Bros.), 2:132.

⁴ A word of clarification is in order. English translations typically capitalize every letter of the word “LORD” in order to alert the English reader that the divine name occurs in the Hebrew text. This name consists of four consonants (known as the Tetragrammaton): YHWH. Since the Jews resisted, apparently out of respect, pronouncing the name of God, the original pronunciation of the word is lost in antiquity. When read aloud, the Jews typically replaced the word with the Hebrew word for “lord,” i.e., *adonai*, even as the translators of the Septuagint inserted the Greek word for “lord” (*kurios*). Various suggestions have been made as possible pronunciation approximations, the most prominent being simply to insert the Hebrew vowel points from *adonai* into the Tetragrammaton—which resulted in “Jehovah,” first appearing in the 14th century. The ASV standardized the term in 1901. Since that time, scholars have generally indicated that “Yahweh” (pronounced yah-way or yah-vay) more nearly approximates the divine name. It is important to understand that the name “Jehovah” is a concocted name that **attempts** to represent the divine name—but no proof exists to verify this claim and, as indicated, the linguistic evidence is against it.

⁵ Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania (2023), *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (Study Edition), JW.org, <https://www.jw.org/en/library/bible/study-bible/books/john/8/>.

⁶ Ibid., <https://www.jw.org/en/library/bible/study-bible/books/exodus/3/>.

⁷ Friedrich Buxsel (1964), ἐγώ, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 2:399.

⁸ It matters not that Jesus spoke Aramaic. He inspired the New Testament to be written

- in Koine Greek.
- ⁹ Leon Morris (1971), *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), p. 473, emp. added.
- ¹⁰ A.T. Robertson (1934), *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press), p. 394.
- ¹¹ A.T. Robertson (1960), *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press), 5:146, emp. added.
- ¹² Marvin Vincent (1905), *Word Studies in the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), 2:170.
- ¹³ Frederic Godet (1893), *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls), 2:122, emp. added.
- ¹⁴ August Tholuck (1836), *A Commentary on the Gospel of St. John* (Boston: Perkins & Marvin), p. 229.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Heinrich Meyer (1891), *Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Gospel of John* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls), p. 293, italics in orig.
- ¹⁷ Marcus Dods (1902), *The Gospel of St. John in The Expositor's Greek Testament* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co.), 1:782.
- ¹⁸ Gerhard Kittel (1967), λέγω, λόγος: "Word and Speech in the New Testament," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 4:130.
- ¹⁹ Benjamin Warfield (1950), *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company), p. 60.
- ²⁰ Ryle, 2:132.
- ²¹ K.J. Cronin (2022), "The Name of God as Revealed in Exodus 3:14," <https://exodus-314.com/part-i-summary>.
- ²² Edwin Abbott (1906), *Johannine Grammar* (London: Adam & Charles Black), p. 187, emp. added.
- ²³ 2:399.
- ²⁴ C.K. Barrett (1978), *The Gospel According to St. John* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster), p. 352.
- ²⁵ Charles Erdman (1922), *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia, PA Westminster), p. 82, emp. added.
- ²⁶ Vincent, 2:181, italics in orig. For more discussion on "I AM," see James White (1990), "Purpose and Meaning of 'Ego Eimi' in the Gospel of John," <https://www.aomin.org/aoblog/general-apologetics/purpose-and-meaning-of-ego-eimi-in-the-gospel-of-john/>.
- ²⁷ For a discussion of the use of "amen" in the Bible, see Dave Miller (1996), *Piloting the Strait* (Pulaski, TN: Sain Publications), pp. 235ff.
- ²⁸ Vincent discusses yet another instance of "I AM" found on the occasion when the Pharisees and the chief priests sent officers to take Jesus by force. Here was Jesus' response to them: "I shall be with you a little while longer, and then I go to Him who sent Me. You will seek Me and not find Me, and where I am you cannot come" (John 7:33-34). Vincent indicates that the phrase "Where I am" refers to Jesus being "in absolute, eternal being and fellowship with the Father" since He used "the formula of the divine existence"—2:162.
- ²⁹ But let us suppose for a moment that "He" **should** be inserted in each of these six occurrences of *ego eimi*. We must still ask the question: With the possible exception of John 18, why would Jesus say, "I am he"? He who? The answer can only be that He was identifying Himself as the Messiah, the divine Son of God. He, Himself, declared this very fact before the authorities: Matthew 26:64; 27:11; Mark 14:61-62; 15:2; Luke 23:3; John 18:37; 1 Timothy 6:13. Even His enemies admitted that He made such claims (Luke 23:1-2; John 10:33; 19:7).

Two Sacred Hills: Why Golgotha, Not Moriah, Was Chosen for Christ's Sacrifice

Jonathan Moore, D.P.M., Ph.D.

GEOGRAPHICAL AND TOPOGRAPHICAL DIFFERENCES

THE geographical and topographical differences between Mount Moriah and Golgotha serve as a compelling introduction to the profound theological reasons for God's choice of Golgotha as the site of Christ's sacrifice. Mount Moriah, rising approximately 2,428 feet (740 meters) above sea level, was not only geographically central but symbolically the heart of Jewish worship. This elevated location was significant in Israel's history, serving as the place where Abraham was tested with the near-sacrifice of his son Isaac (Genesis 22).¹ Surely the provision of the ram in Isaac's place foreshadowed Jesus, the ultimate sacrificial Lamb, Who would later come to fulfill God's redemptive plan. Additionally, Moriah was where Abraham met Melchizedek, king of Salem, who blessed him and offered bread and wine, another typological pointer to Christ's priestly role (Hebrews 7). Furthermore, it was on this mountain that Solomon built the Temple, which became the center of worship and sacrifices for the Jewish people for centuries (2 Chronicles 3:1).

In contrast, Golgotha, where Jesus was crucified, lies outside the city walls of Jerusalem to the west, approximately 600 yards (about a third of a mile) from the Temple. Topographically, Golgotha was part

of an old limestone quarry that had been abandoned and eventually converted into a garden in the early first century. This location, once used for extracting building materials, later became a notorious execution site under Roman rule. It was a public, shameful place, not a hallowed ground of religious significance like the Temple Mount.

The height differences between the Temple Mount and Golgotha are also noteworthy. The Temple Mount stood higher, symbolic of its revered status in Jewish religious life. The grandeur of Herod's Temple would have dominated the skyline, towering over the surrounding city and making it the focal point of worship, pilgrimage, and sacrifice. In contrast, Golgotha was a less distinguished, more isolated place of death, chosen deliberately by the Romans for public executions outside the city walls to maximize humiliation and warning.

Yet, it is precisely in these geographical and topographical differences that we find theological depth. As the following exploration reveals, the distinction between Golgotha and Mount Moriah seems intentional and deeply significant in God's redemptive plan.

GOLGOtha OUTSIDE THE CITY: A FULFILLMENT OF THE SIN OFFERING

ONE of the most profound reasons Jesus was crucified outside the city of Jerusalem on Golgotha, rather than on Mount Moriah, lies in the symbolism of the sin offering. According to the Mosaic Law, sin offerings were to be taken outside the camp to be burned, representing the removal of sin from the community (Leviticus 16:27). Hebrews 13:11-12 directly ties this to Jesus' crucifixion:

The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the

camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood (NIV).

By being crucified outside the city, Jesus fulfilled the role of the sin offering, bearing the sins of humanity. If Jesus had been sacrificed on the Temple Mount, this crucial symbolism would be lost. His sacrifice was not just another offering within the Jewish system—it was something entirely new and greater. It was a sacrifice for sin that removed the need for any further sacrifices, as Hebrews 10:10 says, "We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."

SEPARATION FROM THE JEWISH SACRIFICIAL SYSTEM

THE Temple on Mount Moriah was the heart of the Jewish sacrificial system, which was the central means through which Jews maintained their covenant relationship with God. The sacrifices offered there were temporary, designed to point forward to something greater. Jesus' death brought that system to its fulfillment and end (Hebrews 10:1-4). Hebrews 10:12 tells us that Christ offered a single sacrifice for sins and then sat down at the right hand of God. His death being geographically distinct from the Temple reinforces that His sacrifice was not merely a continuation of the old system, but a completion and replacement of it.

In a sense, God was drawing a theological line between the Old and the New Covenants. Jesus' crucifixion on Golgotha symbolizes the end of the old sacrificial system and the establishment of a New Covenant, one based on His blood (Luke 22:20). This separation is essential to the message of the Gospel, which is that salvation is no longer mediated through animal sacrifices but through the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 9:26-28).

THE TEMPLE'S ROLE AS A SYMBOL OF THE OLD COVENANT

THE Temple itself was a symbol of the Old Covenant and its temporary nature. Jesus prophesied the destruction of the Temple (Matthew 24:2), which would happen in A.D. 70. His crucifixion outside the Temple signifies the passing of the Old Covenant and the impending end of the Temple's role as the center of worship. The curtain of the Temple was torn in two at the moment of Jesus' death (Matthew 27:51), symbolizing that the separation between God and humanity had been removed. Worship was no longer tied to the Temple but to Jesus Himself.

Theologically, placing Jesus' sacrifice on Golgotha emphasizes that the new way of relating to God—through Christ—is separate from the old Temple system. If Jesus had been crucified on Mount Moriah, it would have kept the Temple system too central in the New Covenant. By choosing Golgotha, God made it clear that the Temple system was being replaced by Christ's body, which is the true Temple (John 2:19-21).

AVOIDING SYNCRETISM AND CONFUSION

IMAGINE if Jesus had been crucified on Mount Moriah, where the Jewish Temple stood. This location was not only sacred to Jews but also significant to Christians. Mount Moriah had long been associated with the Mosaic covenant, the priesthood, and the sacrificial system established under the Law. If Christ had died there, it would have been easy for Christians to mistakenly elevate the Temple sacrifices as eternally binding, rather than understanding that Christ was the ultimate fulfillment of all that those sacrifices foreshadowed. The theological implications would have

been disastrous. Instead of the clear break that Christianity needed to distinguish itself as the fulfillment of Judaism, the association between Jesus' sacrifice and the Jewish Temple sacrifices would have led to confusion and potentially syncretism, where people might blend the old Jewish system with the New Covenant.

By separating the locations, God ensured that the two systems—the Mosaic system centered on the Temple and the New Covenant centered on Christ—would remain distinct. Had Golgotha and Mount Moriah overlapped, there might have been a temptation for early Christians (and later followers) to continue to hold the Jewish sacrifices as sacred, alongside Jesus' ultimate sacrifice. This would have undermined the complete sufficiency of Jesus' atonement and perpetuated reliance on the Temple system that Jesus came to replace.

JESUS, THE SACRIFICE FOR ALL NATIONS

MOUNT Moriah, and by extension, the Temple, was the focal point for Jewish worship. It was where Jews believed God's presence dwelled, and only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). By sacrificing Jesus outside the city, God signaled that the sacrifice of His Son was not just for Jews but for the whole world.

As a public place for executions, Golgotha was accessible and visible to all—Jews, Gentiles, Romans, and foreigners alike. This underscores that Jesus' sacrifice was for “every tribe, language, people, and nation” (Revelation 5:9). If Jesus had been sacrificed within the Temple precincts, the message might have been seen as exclusive to Jews, reinforcing the idea that salvation was only through the Jewish system.

CONCLUSION

THEFORE, the distinct separation between Mount Moriah and Golgotha was no accident. Golgotha, a place of rejection, became the site of salvation, while Moriah, with all its ancient significance, remains the heart of the Old Covenant, which Christ came to fulfill. By choosing Golgotha for the sacrifice of Jesus rather than Mount Moriah, God demonstrated the distinctiveness of Jesus' sacrifice from the old system. Golgotha symbolizes Jesus as the ultimate sin offering, fulfilling the Law but establishing a New Covenant that transcends the Jewish Temple and its rituals.

Jesus was not sacrificed where kings ruled or priests labored. God, in His wisdom, chose for the ultimate sacrifice to take place in a place of rejection—a place reserved for the cursed and the despised. This site was far more fitting for the One Who came “to seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10) and to bear the sins of the world. The separation of these two sites prevents any syncretism and keeps the focus on Christ's sacrifice for *all* nations, rather than allowing it to be tied to the Jewish sacrificial system. This separation

preserves the truth that Jesus' sacrifice is the end of all sacrifices, and that in Him, all peoples—Jews and Gentiles alike—find their way to God.

ENDNOTES

¹ However, it is crucial to note that when God directed Abraham to offer Isaac in Genesis 22:2, He specified “the land of Moriah,” not necessarily Mount Moriah. This phrase may imply that the broader region in which Jerusalem sits, including Mount Moriah and other nearby elevations, was encompassed within the “land of Moriah.” While some may argue this point, Scripture specifically connects the building of Solomon’s Temple on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite with the exact site of Abraham’s offering of Isaac. These two events—Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Isaac and Solomon’s Temple construction—are indelibly linked in Scripture (see Genesis 22:2 and 2 Chronicles 3:1). These verses bridge the geographical and theological significance of Mount Moriah as the site for Israel’s Temple and the place of Abraham’s test of faith.



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NOTE FROM *The Editor*



Truth Hunters, Bible Facts, and Family Fun!



If you are anything like me and enjoy books that emphasize biblical values through creative storytelling, then I believe that you and your family will love AP's newest book titled *Truth Hunters*, co-authored by Jeremy Pate (AP's Youth Publications Coordinator) and the talented Josh Hardin (who has teamed up with AP on several projects through the years). *Truth Hunters* is a story of what it takes to find and defend the truth of God's Word, told in a way that will engage and inspire children and families. This creative work will also get young people excited about VBS in 2025 [if your home congregation chooses to use AP's *Truth Hunters* VBS (on the inspiration of the Bible), available in February 2025]. At only \$5.95 (for a 260-page book!), why not consider giving a copy of *Truth Hunters* to every young person in your sphere of

influence? (I personally plan to give away several as Christmas gifts.)

And who doesn't like to play a good board game with friends and family, especially one that reinforces Bible knowledge? Apologetics Press is thrilled to present our first-ever board game for the family—*Truth Hunters: The Board Game*. Originally designed to be played as a follow-up to the *Truth Hunters* VBS (with 500 questions that reinforce teachings on the inspiration of the Bible), it also includes 500 general Bible questions (from the Law of Moses to the Gospel accounts, and from wisdom literature to the book of Acts). Furthermore, a "booster pack" of 1,000 more general Bible questions is scheduled to be available in the Spring of 2025.

Not only is *Truth Hunters: The Board Game* a great idea for families, but it may also be used occasionally as supplemental Bible class material, as an end-of-the-quarter special Bible class period, or just some youth group fun in general. God's Word can be learned by reading, listening, singing, and, yes, even at times, by "playing"—a Bible-based, enjoyable board game.

Eric Lyons

See Center Spread for More Details